"A contradiction in terms": Patrick Neate's "City of tiny lights" as a literary intervention into post-9/11 discourse

Frank, Michael C

Abstract: This essay discusses the relationship between popular literature and what various scholars have termed the "terrorism myth." Using the example of British writer Patrick Neate's 2005 novel "City of Tiny Lights," I emphasize the meta- and counter-discursive potentials of fiction. My thesis is that "City of Tiny Lights" may be characterized as a critical intervention into the then current public discourse on terrorism, and that this intervention occurs at four levels: first, the novel's characters explicitly discuss counter-terrorist rhetoric, questioning the appropriateness and meaningfulness of key concepts such as "war on terror"; second, the novel's plot is deliberately designed to undercut common notions of the terrorist as a religious fundamentalist, portraying the perpetrators as either narcissistic megalomaniacs or misguided youths whose motivation is to be sought in their individual life histories and circumstances rather than in universal terrorist ideologies; third, the novel uses a postcolonial detective to expose the epistemological limitations of counter-terrorism, which (so Neate's characters claim) is unable to think beyond established pattems; and fourth, the narrator-protagonist comments on the political instrumentalization of fear.

Originally published at:
Frank, Michael C (2011). "A contradiction in terms": Patrick Neate's "City of tiny lights" as a literary intervention into post-9/11 discourse. In: Austenfeld, Thomas; Daphinoff, Dimiter; Herlth, Jens. Terrorism and narrative practice. Münster: LIT-Verlag, 61-79.

Terrorism and Narrative Practice

edited by

Thomas Austenfeld, Dimiter Daphinoff
and Jens Herlth

Münster, Germany:

LIT, 2011

"A Contradiction in Terms": Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights* as a Literary Intervention into post-9/11 Discourse

Michael C. Frank

I

In the mass of writing on terrorism, the study *Terror and Taboo* by social anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass has proved particularly suggestive for the purposes of literary studies. Written under the immediate impression of the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings of 1993 and 1995, respectively, it puts forth the premise that public perception of terrorism relies heavily on myth and that it therefore requires a specific method of critical analysis, which the authors term "a mythography of Terror" (Zulaika and Douglass x). Most relevant in the present context is the observation that "regarding terrorism, the brandishing of stark facts goes hand in hand with great leaps into discursive fantasy" and that this raises the question as "to what extent all discourse on terrorism must conform to and borrow from some form of fictionalization" (4). It should be noted that Zulaika and Douglass apply a very broad definition of "fiction" as "the crafting of a narrative" (4). What they name "terrorism discourse" is said to encompass literary as well as non-literary "types of fictionalization – representation by the media, political manipulation, academic definitions, the imaginary archetype informing the thriller" (16).

In its emphasis on narrativization, the approach laid out by Zulaika and Douglass seems to call for the expertise of literary studies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the two first book-length explorations of terrorism in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature – Margaret Scanlan's

Plotting Terror (2001) and Alex Houen's *Terrorism and Modern Literature* (2002) – both cite the study in their introductions. But neither is primarily concerned with literature's relation to the myth-laden discourse on terrorism. It was up to Robert Appelbaum and Alexis Paknadel to first address this issue in their 2008 article "Terrorism and the Novel," even if their answers remain tentative. After having suggested that fiction both responds and contributes to terrorism discourse, "adding its own coloration to the mythic identity of terrorism," Appelbaum and Paknadel hint at the possibility that "[p]erhaps, it challenges that mythic identity as well" (389). The authors continue by asking what "*cultural work*" the novelistic genre may be said to perform in this regard (389; emphasis added). Their comprehensive exploration of English-language novels from 1970 to 2001 leads them to the conclusion that the cultural work accomplished by terrorism fiction "has been by and large to legitimate the position of innocence occupied by terrorism's victims and the political society to which they belong. . . . These novels tell us that terrorism is the violence of an Other; it is illegitimate violence perpetrated from an illegitimate position" (427).

Although thought-provoking, such a conclusion is not entirely satisfactory, since it neglects other functions and dimensions of terrorism fiction, beyond the question of legitimacy. Moreover, in highlighting the extent to which the majority of novels affirm the basic tenets of terrorism discourse, it does not pay sufficient attention to the meta- and counter-discursive potentials of fiction. There are literary works – both pre- and post-9/11 – that are careful not to uncritically reproduce counter-terrorist stereotypes (even if they are not always successful in their attempts). Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights* is one such book. Published at the end of June 2005, shortly before the 7/7 suicide bombings on the London transit system, *City of Tiny Lights* was among the first post-9/11 narratives to describe an imaginary terrorist incident (rather than fictionalizing the actual New York attacks and their political, social, and emotional aftermath). It did so with a relatively small degree of sensationalism. The consequences of the bombings – which kill twelve people and severely injure three others – are only briefly mentioned (see Neate 292), and the novel ends soon after the incident. Neate is more interested in the origin of the attack. Consequently, his book does not offer the perspective of the victims, but provides some glimpses of the fictional group responsible for the assault.

The novel devotes a long passage to the mastermind behind the bombings: Saudi-born Azmat Al-Dubayan, whose story partly parallels that of Osama bin Laden. Like bin Laden, Al-Dubayan is the son of a wealthy construction businessman, and like bin Laden, he attended Jeddah's King Abdul-Aziz University. Contrary to his real-life counterpart, however, Al-Dubayan was far from becoming a religious extremist at this point in his life. Rather, he pursued his studies in the UK, married a British woman, and started a career "in the London arm of a Scandinavian firm that sold mid-range kitchens from out-of-town retail parks" (162). As investigator Tommy learns by googling "Al-Dubayan," the latter's radicalization only occurred after his propensity for domestic violence had cost him both his wife and his job. Beginning to frequent Willesden mosque, he was strongly impressed with the former Mujahideen (and, in some cases, future terrorists) that he met there. Having misappropriated a large sum of money from his father's business, he began to re-fashion himself as a radical leader, concocting an idiosyncratic agenda which combined "Islam (if only because he said so) and anti-capitalism in all its forms (always easy for a multi-millionaire)" (165). Al-Dubayan alienated the Muslim community in London and was banished from the mosque, but managed to attract the attention of "impressionable young men" (165). He eventually founded a "'study group' ... the Post-Western Alliance (or PWA)" (165) and achieved brief notoriety for his provocative "pronouncements in support of the [9/11] hijackers" (166). Yet it was not until Italian intelligence uncovered a bomb plot against "Florence's finest history" (166) that Al-Dubayan was considered a danger to national security. When the plot sets in, he is known – and feared – as a terrorist.

As I want to argue in this essay, *City of Tiny Lights* may be characterized as an attempt at intervening into the current public discourse on terrorism. This approach to Neate's novel is indebted to the emerging field of "Critical Terrorism Studies" (Jackson, Smith, and Grunning) inaugurated by political scientist Richard Jackson in 2005. In his study *Writing the War on Terrorism*, Jackson reads post-9/11 statements by members of the Bush administration as parts of a political narrative created to generate public support for an unprecedented counter-terrorist campaign – both at home (the USA Patriot Act and its incursions into civil rights) and abroad (the various battlefields of the war on terrorism). Such measures, Jackson ar-

gues, presuppose a large degree of consensus. The war on terrorism, therefore, had to be normalized – something that the discourse implemented by the Bush administration achieved to great effect. According to Jackson, the most important features of this discourse are the interpretation of the terrorist attacks as an "act of war" necessitating a military response, the legitimization of the battle as one between good versus evil (and, hence, a just war), as well as the corresponding demonizing and dehumanizing of the enemy. Jackson also emphasizes the exaggeration of the threat of terrorism and the idea of an entirely new kind of war to which old rules no longer apply. Excluded from this dominant narrative are explanations of terrorism implicating American foreign policy, an effect reinforced by the positioning of 9/11 as a radical rupture (see Jarvis), which separates the event from its roots in earlier political conflicts and thus entails a de-historicization.

Several of these aspects are addressed by Patrick Neate's novel, whose intervention into post-9/11 discourse occurs at four levels: first, its characters explicitly discuss counter-terrorist rhetoric, questioning the appropriateness and meaningfulness of key concepts such as "war on terror"; second, the novel's plot is deliberately designed to undercut common notions of the terrorist as a religious fundamentalist, portraying the perpetrators as either narcissistic megalomaniacs or misguided youths whose motivation is to be sought in their individual life histories and circumstances rather than in universal terrorist ideologies; third, the novel uses a postcolonial detective to expose the epistemological limitations of counter-terrorism, which (so Neate's characters claim) is unable to think beyond established patterns; fourth, the narrator-protagonist comments on the political instrumentalization of fear. The following discussion of *City of Tiny Lights* will devote one section to each of these aspects.

II

Patrick Neate's references to the so-called "war on terrorism" are not immediately apparent. His novel opens as the prostitute "exoticmelody" (alias Melody Chase) hires private investigator Tommy Akhtar, an ethnic Indian, to find her missing roommate and colleague "sexyrussian" (alias Natalya or Natasha Kuzmin). The two women have an agreement concerning outcall engagements: when one meets a new client for the first time, the other waits

nearby until she receives a signal that all is right. After their last meeting of this sort in the Embassy Club in Mayfair, Natasha vanished without a trace. It soon turns out that her client for that night, an English MP called Anthony Bailey, was brutally murdered in the hotel room which he had booked for the occasion. Tommy is able to track down Natasha in Lymington, Hampshire, but does not close the case. Intrigued by the increasingly mysterious circumstances of the MP's death and driven on by what he repeatedly calls his "strange affection for the truth" (Neate 108, 128, 155), he begins to investigate the murder of Anthony Bailey.

Only at this point does the phenomenon of terrorism come into play. Tommy eventually finds out that on the night of Natasha's disappearance, Melody also had an appointment with a client – none other than the wanted terrorist Al-Dubayan, a regular customer of hers. When Al-Dubayan made a brief appearance in the club on the night in question, he was immediately recognized by Bailey, who tried to make a phone call and then wrote down something on his Palm Pilot. Having observed this, Al-Dubayan asked Melody's pimp to murder the MP. What started out as a routine search for a missing person thus develops into a murder case, which in turn becomes an investigation into a secret conspiracy linking terrorists and secret agents. When Tommy is himself assaulted by the murderer of Anthony Bailey, he eventually realizes that he has another enemy apart from Al-Dubayan: a man who goes by the name of Dimitri Gaileov and who calls himself a Russian. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that this ominous stranger is none other than American CIA agent Chip Paradowski – and that it was *he* who provided Al-Dubayan the plastic explosives used in the London bombings.

Neate's critical intentions with respect to counter-terrorist discourse first manifest themselves half-way through the book, in a long dialogue between the first-person narrator Tommy and his father, Farzad. Farzad once worked as a doctor in Uganda, but was forced to leave the country when dictator Idi Amin Dada ordered the expulsion of the Asian minority in 1972. Holding British citizenship, the Akhtar family emigrated to London, where Farzad became a shop owner before trying his hand at painting. At the present point in the story – which turns out to be a pivotal moment – Farzad is already familiar to the reader as a likeable eccentric, whose vision is sometimes impeded by his alcohol-fuelled grief over his wife's death and

various other obsessions. There is no question, therefore, that his words have to be taken with a grain of salt. But it nevertheless transpires that Farzad's lesson to his son is simultaneously the novel's lesson to its readers. The occasion for this lesson is Al-Dubayan, whom "the British media" designate as "a notorious fundamentalist terrorist" (158). For Farzad, any explanation of the phenomenon in question in terms of "religious fundamentalism" misses the heart of the matter. "In my humble opinion," he tells his son, "this Al-Dubayan fellow represents a phenomenon that is altogether more modern and, indeed, more dangerous. ... [H]e's an opportunist, Tommy boy. An *opportunist*" (158–59).

Farzad continues:

> "... I dislike the way the establishment and the celebrated fourth estate in this country – *my* country – use the word 'fundamentalism' when their meaning is 'fanaticism'. It is yet another example of every Tom, Dick and Harry playing silly buggers with the English language. Fundamentalism is, after all, inherently rational within the parameters of a closed belief system. *Ipse facto*, if you want to imply a person is irrational or misguided, then they are not a fundamentalist but a fanatic. ... What is more, since fundamentalism (albeit as it is currently misapprehended) is always associated with religion, it excuses us Godless British citizens from any reverse accusations. But isn't our democratically elected government (relatively speaking) guilty of democratic fundamentalism? Or rather, to use the correct terminology, are they not democratic fanatics? The gall of this nation, Tommy boy. The gall of it!" (158)

It must be noted that these statements are accompanied by several comic elements. Not only is Farzad's tone deliberately schoolmasterly, Neate also creates situation comedy by setting the scene in a hospital room where Tommy – who receives morphine – is slowly recovering from a near-deadly assault with a hammer, not yet in full possession of his senses. Tommy adds to the grotesquely humorous dimension of the scene by giving ironic descriptions of Farzad's antics, while emphasizing his own difficulties in following his father's deliberations. But Farzad's points about the exclusive association of "fundamentalism" with "religion" and its misleading equation with "irrationalism" are nonetheless to be taken seriously. The *Merriam-Webster* distinguishes two usages of the term "fundamentalism"; the first – "a movement in 20th century Protestantism emphasizing the literally interpreted Bible as fundamental to Christian life and teaching" – has

now been largely superseded by the second: "[an] attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles." Interestingly, the dictionary's two examples of the latter usage are "Islamic fundamentalism" as well as "political fundamentalism." Farzad's point is precisely that the war on terrorism, which was publicly legitimized as a defense (and enforcement) of Western democratic values and freedoms, may be described as a form of political fundamentalism – and that the one-sided labeling of radical Islamists as "fundamentalists" is therefore to some degree arbitrary.

Farzad then goes on to challenge the phrase "war on terror" itself:

> "I tell you, son. The 'war on terror' is a contradiction in terms. ... One: when someone is labelled a terrorist, they are immediately removed from the rules of humanity that regulate us all. Two: the nature of war as agreed by civilized society is that it is fought within just such a set of rules. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, the phrase 'war on terror' is a contradiction in terms! ...
> The meaning of the word 'terrorist' depends entirely upon context. Nelson Mandela? Mahatma Gandhi? These fellows were once called terrorists too. One man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter." (Neate 159–60)

In an interview conducted in the context of a 2007 conference on multiethnic Britain, Patrick Neate points out that the above-cited passage was one of the main targets of criticism in early responses to the novel. As he remembers, "one critic picked up on that and sort of sneered and said: 'What do you think this is, A-level politics?'" (Neate in Topolova 412). Neate insists that the apparent truism according to which "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" is no longer trivial, since such a relativist perspective has been conspicuously absent from public discourse on Islamist terrorism since September 11, 2001.

Neate makes his narrator-protagonist a former Mujahid, whose grief and guilt over his mother's death once made him turn to religion. After having gone through "a minor mental-health episode" (Neate 41), Tommy travelled to Ahmadabad, Lahore, Peshawar, and finally Zhawar, where he joined the troops of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (an authentic Mujahideen leader, who would later become Prime Minister of Afghanistan and who is now a wanted terrorist). Tommy intersperses his investigation narrative with several flashbacks relating his experiences in Afghanistan, first as a fighter, then as the driver for an American agent. By thus incorporating the Soviet-

Mujahideen War into the plot of his novel, Neate draws attention to the uncomfortable fact that today's terrorism network Al-Qaeda (literally, "the base") started out as an organization for the recruitment of Muslim soldiers (see Wright). The fight of these "holy warriors" was not only secretly financed by the USA (see Coll) – in accordance with the "Reagan doctrine" of supporting guerilla insurgencies against Marxist or pro-Soviet regimes – but also officially identified (in highly emphatic terms) as a legitimate struggle for freedom (see Reagan). Against this backdrop, the famous sentence could just as well read: "The freedom fighter of one period is the terrorist of another."

III

But such a historical contextualization is incompatible with the post-9/11 concept of the terrorist as personified "evil." As Patrick Neate himself noted in 2007:

> In the climate of fear that is being created by our government it is actually fundamentally important that we acknowledge this and that we understand these things, you know, and ... the most vital and essential part of this climate of fear that is being created by the Blair government is that evil is totally evil. But that means the creation of this idea of a terrorist being someone's freedom fighter, which seems like a truism out of elementary school politics, is actually totally lost and has to be reengaged with. (Neate in Topolova 412)

In his address to the American people on the evening of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush famously stated: "Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature" ("Address"). The term "evil" was to become a fixture in the President's discourse during his first term in office, giving expression to his sharply polarized vision of the geopolitical situation after 9/11 by dividing the world into two parties: on the one hand, the terrorists and their supporters (a category that the Bush administration defined deliberately broadly), on the other, the lovers and defenders of democratic freedom under the leadership of the USA. On January 5, 2002, Bush gave the following explanation for his choice of language: "I say 'evil people' because I don't view this as a religious war. I view this as a struggle of good versus evil" ("Remarks"). As Bush repeatedly stressed in his speeches of

that time, the dichotomy of "good" and "evil" was not supposed to draw a line between Western Judeo-Christian culture and Islam per se; rather, he conceived the war as one between "good" people of all creeds and "the evil ones" – the latter category also comprising individuals, groups, and governments who "harbored these people or fed them or clothed them or tried to provide them help" and who were therefore "just as guilty as the terrorists were" ("Remarks"). Rather than a religious conflict, Bush explained in the early phases of the "war on terror," this was a struggle between civilization (alias "freedom," as epitomized by U.S. society) and barbarians who killed out of sheer hatred for the values of freedom-loving nations. While these specifications excluded the category of the "religious war," they were all the same imbued with theological overtones, casting the terrorist as an antagonist whose essential evilness was ultimately metaphysical. "The evil one," after all, is a Biblical term for Satan.

Whereas the Bush administration's demonization of terrorists and their supporters has drawn much critical commentary, it is sometimes overlooked that British Prime Minister Tony Blair used the word "evil" in a strikingly similar vein. In his first statement to the nation after the September 11 attacks, Blair declared: "[T]his mass terrorism is the new evil in our world." The second passage that resonated with Bush's rhetoric was a reference to the perpetrators' "barbarism." For Blair, too, the attack could only be met with a battle "between the free and democratic world and terrorism," and he immediately announced that Britain would stand at America's side "until this evil is driven from our world" (BBC News, "Blair's Statement"). Like Bush, Blair later took care not to indiscriminately associate evilness with Islam. On July 16, 2005, nine days after the London bombings, he underlined that the "evil ideology" which had manifested itself in that event "was a strain within the world-wide religion of Islam." Even though this ideology was a religious one, Blair added, it did not constitute "a clash of civilisations," since "all civilised people, Muslim or other, feel revulsion at it." Accordingly, the new evil had to be fought in "a global struggle ... of ideas, hearts and minds, both within Islam and outside it" (BBC News, "Full Text"). Blair thus explicitly distanced himself from any interpretation of the "war on terrorism" as a fulfillment of the predicted "clash of civilizations." He did, however, reinforce the binary logic inherent in that theory by drawing a boundary not between *two* civilizations, but between *all* civ-

ilizations deserving that name (and, thus, civilization *tout court*) and the "other" of civilization, namely barbarism.

In the words of Richard Jackson, the clear implication of the post-9/11 rhetoric of barbarism and evil is that "the terrorists behave as they do not because they are rationally calculating political actors but simply because it is in their nature to be evil" (59). Official discourse portrays them as embodiments of absolute alterity, whose essential evilness makes any investigation of personal motives unnecessary. Because "'evil' is its own motivation and its own self-contained explanation" (Jackson 69), one does not need to look any further into the multi-layered causality of terrorist careers. *City of Tiny Lights* has to be read against this discursive backdrop, as the author himself emphasizes. For Neate, the categorical refusal to engage with the individual histories of the perpetrators is one of the principal shortcomings of the current debates on suicide terrorism. After the 7/7 bombings, Tony Blair insisted that the incident "was not an aberrant act," "not random," and "not a product of particular local circumstances in West Yorkshire" (BBC News, "Full Text"). Neate's pre-7/7 scenario of a possible attack on the London underground system seems to make the opposite claim. It depicts a fictional case of terrorism in which the perpetrators are ordinary people, whose actions are the result of various contingent factors rather than the necessary consequence of context-independent beliefs:

> And again, the very important idea of the book is that what transpires as a series of terrorist attacks is carried out by opportunists and kids and by people who have been led the wrong way. Just human beings. And that doesn't mean that I condone or excuse their actions, but I do try to highlight this very black and white, racist way of thinking that is becoming all pervasive in my society and frightens the living daylights out of me. (Neate in Topolova 412)

Neate's point here is that most concepts that are commonly applied to so-called terrorists are deceptive in their binary simplification (see Rosenberg), inhibiting a genuine understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of the phenomenon thus described. Once more, it is Farzad who gives expression to this view in the novel: "Religious fundamentalists? Terrorists? These labels are just the same: easily applied, hard to remove and designed to obscure your view" (Neate 160). During his exchange with Tommy, the ex-Mujahid, Farzad asks his son: "When you decided to play silly bug-

gers with the Soviet Union, what were you doing? Were you a terrorist? Were you a freedom fighter?" – to which Tommy replies: "I was just a kid" (160). Accordingly, Tommy's short stint as a "holy warrior" is explained as an attempt to escape from his own family (and the troubling thought of his mother's death) and to find "new brothers" elsewhere. As Tommy remembers it, shooting down Soviet helicopters with Stinger missiles was not "an act of religion or politics but belonging" (41).

Judging from his own autobiographical experience, Tommy assumes that Al-Dubayan's entry into Islamism was similarly "the result, as these things often are (and I'm speaking as a geezer with the knowledge), of a succession of unhappy circumstances" (162). Put in more general terms, Tommy's argument is that people are not born terrorists but become so under certain conditions, and that this does not necessarily entail a radical transformation of their personality: merely by employing the rhetoric and tactics of terrorism, they turn into terrorists, regardless of how genuine and sincere their declared beliefs may be. While this recognition does not make terrorist acts any less dangerous – since even a "wife-beating, family-conning, kitchen-fitting, tom-punting fraud" (185) like Al-Dubayan is able to incite others to murder – it may nevertheless contribute to a demythification of the phenomenon by removing it from the metaphysical realm of quintessential "evil."

IV

City of Tiny Lights partakes in the tradition of the "hard-boiled" thriller established by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, a tradition that is usually defined against the "classic" British detective story. In the latter, the mystery represents the only disturbance in an otherwise intact social order which is restored as soon as the culprit is identified. The detective may be an eccentric, but his or her logical deductions represent a triumph of rationality. Agatha Christie's much-imitated novels in particular are usually set in upper-middle-class circles, sometimes using rural locations. By contrast, the American detective of the hard-boiled thriller moves in a corrupt and violent urban milieu, in which the line between good and evil is blurry, and the hero himself is a far more ambivalent figure (see Horsley 75). Lee Horsley points out, however, that any strict division between

British and American detective fiction is misleading on both historical and formal grounds, since it fails to acknowledge exchanges and overlaps that tie the two traditions together (see 67–68). Additionally, the hard-boiled tradition has proved to be "readily transformable" (68), changing according to the political and social contexts in which it was taken up – inside as well as outside the USA.

Patrick Neate's novel is a case in point. In best postmodern fashion, its indebtedness to Raymond Chandler is made explicit by the first-person narrator himself, when he confesses that he is "the latest in a long line of Marlowe wannabes" (Neate 192). As is well known to readers familiar with the genre, the detective of the classic hard-boiled thriller is a loner, whose alienation from society is an integral aspect of the genre's distinctive narrative mode. Possibly for this reason, the genre has proved particularly well-suited to postcolonial story-telling. Ed Christian notes that whereas "[m]ost indigenous postcolonial detectives have been created not by indigenous authors but by ex-colonizers," "postcolonial writers most often write about postcolonial detectives living and working in Western countries" ("Ethnic" 283, 284). Both of these observations are also true for Neate's novel. *City of Tiny Lights* is a detective story written by a white London-born author using the point of view of an ethnic Indian. Although a British citizen by birth, Neate's narrator is regularly confronted with the fact that many of his fellow Londoners consider him a "Paki." Fred Halliday maintains that this term of abuse is not primarily a religious, but "almost wholly a racial epithet, referring to skin colour and clothing," and that it is "applied indiscriminately to South Asians of any religion, be they Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh or Jain" (181). It should be added, moreover, that the term "Paki" is also used for people from Middle Eastern countries. Twice in the novel Tommy realizes that others (in this case, two Brits of African-Caribbean descent) cannot "tell an Arab and an Asian apart" (Neate 231), so that the drug dealer who saw Al-Dubayan on the night of the murder describes the latter as looking like Tommy: "Indian? Maybe. Or Arab" (138).

In the introduction to his volume on the "post-colonial detective," Ed Christian writes:

> A distinctive feature of hard-boiled and police procedural detective fiction is the way detectives frequently proceed from the interrogation of suspects to the interrogation of society. Individual crime comes to be seen as a symptom of, result

> of, or reaction to basic flaws in the political, social, and industrial systems. Postcolonial detectives, approaching crime with a special sensitivity enhanced by their marginalized positions, are especially quick to notice societal contradictions because they have always been exploited by them. ("Introducing" 2)

This perfectly applies to Neate's novel, in which the hero's perspective is that of a perceived outsider to white British mainstream culture. When Tommy says, "I'm a Paki-immigrant-Ugandan-Indian Englishman myself" (Neate 122), the emphasis is on "Englishman" (the occasion of the remark being a schoolmate's mother's general critique of Englishmen). Similarly, Tommy later tells his father: "But I'm English" (317). He suspects, however, that he will never be fully accepted as such by others. During his interactions with white people, he is constantly reminded of his marginality. Even his friend in the police force, Detective Sergeant Cal Donnelly (himself an Irishman), calls him by the nickname "my immigrant friend" (e.g., 106, 310, 312). Another strong reminder of Tommy's inferior status is the behavior of the authorities, for instance, when he is checked by Immigration officers at Heathrow airport (see 197). Episodes such as this have indeed endowed Tommy "with a special sensitivity," as Christian phrases it in the above quotation. Tommy's skeptical view of public opinion, the media, the police, and the secret service is clearly marked by his personal experience. But his peculiar position as a postcolonial detective also affects his investigation in several other ways.

In a crucial passage, Tommy describes his way of life as "*variously*" that of "a Ugandan-Indian, a Paki, an immigrant, a Londoner, an Englishman" (295; emphasis added), thereby indicating that he considers himself not a sum of these parts but a performer of several distinct roles, each of which has to be played separately. Throughout the narrative, Tommy repeatedly uses the prejudicial expectations of others to his own advantage. In order to draw attention from himself, he once pretends to be "Younis Khan" (50) from Leicester – the town with the largest Indian population in England and Wales – assuming the accent and behavior he thinks appropriate to the role. More importantly, his marginal position also gives him access to specific "cultural knowledge" (Neate 172), which the various institutions of law enforcement lack. Tommy asserts that the "intelligence boys" at MI5 are unable to deal with "lone bandits with gargantuan egos

and money to burn" (172) because such perpetrators do not fit their established profiles. In other words: police and secret service are incapable of breaking out of familiar thought-patterns. According to Tommy, this explains why Al-Dubayan is still on the loose, while his clandestine cell is able to hold regular meetings "in a backroom at Kilburn Library" (172) – as Farzad and presumably many others know. This is not the only crucial piece of information provided by Farzad. Tommy's father is also the first to realize the degree to which MI5 and CIA are involved in the whole affair, reproaching his son for "thinking like an Englishman" (317) and for consequently failing to come to such conclusions himself. With the help of his father, Tommy is eventually able to overcome – at least momentarily – the limitations on thought imposed by stereotypical, preconceived notions of terrorism and to thus gain dangerous insights into the true nature of the case.

V

Set in the context of the "war on terrorism," *City of Tiny Lights* reflects the dangers that the post-9/11 climate of fear poses to a pluralist society. It does so by contrasting Tommy Akhtar's vision of London – and England more generally – with that of American CIA agent Chip Paradowski. For Tommy, England is a space that can easily accommodate diversity and difference. This vision is formulated in a scene in which Tommy skims through a high-society magazine at his friend Cal Donnelly's house. Having discovered his former schoolmate Lovely in one of the many photographs of upper-class people "sipping champagne," he wonders whether Lovely – an Indian like himself – feels "more or less English" now that he has risen so high in society (Neate 277–78). Tommy comes to the conclusion that the "toffs" represented in the magazine do not live in any England he knows:

> The England I knew was a cheek-by-jowl kind of place where seemingly polar opposites were wedded by nation, frustration and location, location, location: stroppy Pakis to small-town racists, the morally fundamental to the morally bereft, office juniors to senior management, thug-lites to petrified pensioners, suburban swingers to pregnant pubescent, coke-addled hookers to coke-addled media whores, aspirant Africans to resigned Rastas, loaded gym freaks to obese benefit junkies, entrepreneurs to economic migrants, organized crime to chaotic bureaucracy, politi-

cians to terrorists, hopeless to hopeful. And like all marriages these were for better or worse, richer or poorer, till death them would part as discovered by one Anthony Bailey, MP. (278)

Tommy's enumeration of apparent "polar opposites" such as "Pakis" and "racists" emphasizes plurality, but also deliberately weds different social types across gender, ethnic, generational, professional, ideological, and other lines. The notion of generally peaceful coexistence is thus complemented by the idea of a – self-chosen – union and bond. In the course of the novel, this emphatic concept of postcolonial London is openly challenged by secret service officials who suggest that distrust in people of non-white ethnicities is a necessary means of preserving security. As Paradowski tells Tommy:

"There's a lot to be scared of these days, Tommy. Ordinary folk in a city like London don't know it or they choose not to admit it but there's danger on every corner; danger from people just like you. It may be from you or it may be from people like you but, frankly, I don't give a rat's ass. Because if I f__ you up? If I make an example of a piece of shit like you? The way I see it, I'm doing the honest citizens of the free world a favour.
One, they see you and your pals as the morally bankrupt SOBs you really are. And, two, they come to realize that there's another enemy just waiting to perform some heinous act and they will react with appropriate fear. You see? What is it they call it here? 'Defence of the realm.' That's my business. 'Defence of the realm.' Are we on the same page here, Tommy? Do we understand each other?" (207)

Among many other things, *City of Tiny Lights* reflects the problematic consequences of such ethnic profiling. Towards the end of the novel, Tommy realizes that after the bombings, London is no longer as it used to be. Peering out of his window at the city, he asks himself: "Was it my imagination or was it different somehow? I figured that it looked peculiarly uncertain, nervous, temporary. Even if it was my imagination did that make the perception less real?" (Neate 303). For Tommy, changes in the representation and perception of a city necessarily affect its reality as a space that is more than its physical substance – a real-and-imagined place concretized in the minds of its inhabitants. Accordingly, he comes to the conclusion that "something had changed, for real":

London was now a city where gullible kids carrying bombs blew up in your local

neighbourhood. That was a shift. Check the understatement. It struck me that the PWA [i.e. Post-Western Alliance] had got their way. It struck me that Jones and Paradowski [i.e. the British and the American secret service officials] had got their way too. They were all on the same side. London was scared. (303)

At this point, Tommy's harmonious vision of London's metropolitan community seems to belong to the past: the fear of the "terrorists amongst our midst" has driven a wedge into the population, stigmatizing "ethnics" as potential perpetrators who cannot be trusted. The creation of fear in a large target group is, by definition, the aim of terrorism. Tommy suggests that it is also the aim of the officials with the task of *fighting* the terrorists. In an earlier aside, Tommy remarks: "Ask any world leader from the dark continent to the White House: keep the people scared and you'll keep them in check. And keeping them scared of you is the simplest but keeping them scared of an idea (Communism, Islam or whatever) is the height of progress" (103).

As sociologist Frank Furedi points out, the accusation that political elites deliberately create anxiety in the public "in order to realize their objectives" (123) has been voiced numerous times since 9/11, both in Britain and the United States. Furedi agrees that such a strategy has indeed been employed to minimize dissent over the war on terrorism. Yet he also emphasizes that the "politics of fear" is not limited to those in power; it is used by governments as well as political oppositions, public officials as well as non-state actors (see 123–41). In this light, Neate may be reproached for following up his critique of public fear-mongering by indulging in a different sort of paranoia: according to the conspiracy-theorish ending of his novel, "British/American Intelligence were implicated in terrorist attacks" (319). This plot device constitutes a variation of the "corrupt system" motif that is so common in crime fiction. But even when understood as a mere concession to generic convention, such an ending seems counter-productive with respect to Neate's intended intervention into terrorism discourse. For if the real source of terror lies in state institutions rather than in non-state groups, then we have even more reason to be afraid.

In other respects, too, Neate may be said to overstate his case. The terrorists described in his novel are "not in any way religiously motivated" (305). As its name suggests, the "Post-Western Alliance" seeks to erect "a new world order" on the ruins of "Western anti-civilization" (166). While

this undercuts the equation of "terrorism" with "religious fundamentalism," it reinforces the reduction of jihadism to an attack on Western values and lifestyles, which "obscure[s] its very specific and regionally focused political objectives" (Mockaitis 63). In his posthumously released martyrdom video, 7/7 ringleader Mohammad Sidique Khan offers a primarily political justification for his deeds. Defending terrorism as retaliation for military violence against Muslim countries, Khan casts himself as a soldier who brings the terrors of war to Britain. At the same time, he (seemingly paradoxically) insists that "[o]ur driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our religion is Islam – obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad... This is how our ethical stances are dictated" (BBC News, "London Bomber"). To describe Khan as either an "opportunist" (of the Al-Dubayan variety) or "just a kid" seems equally inadequate. At the same time, however, the case of the four 7/7 suicide bombers shows that terrorism discourse, with its rhetoric of radical othering, is even less helpful. As the *7/7 Official Report* notes, the perpetrators' "backgrounds ... appear largely unexceptional" (Home Office 13). Not only were they British citizens; they were also – to quote Patrick Neate – "[j]ust human beings."

Works Cited

Appelbaum, Robert, and Alexis Paknadel. "Terrorism and the Novel, 1970–2001." *Poetics Today* 29.3 (2008): 387–436.

BBC News. "Blair's Statement in Full." *BBC News* 11 Sep. 2001. Accessed August 16, 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/1538551.stm.

—. "Full Text: Blair Speech on Terror." *BBC News* 16 Jul. 2005. Accessed August 16, 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4689363.stm.

—. "London Bomber: Text in Full." *BBC News* 1 Sep. 2005. Accessed July 14, 2011. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4206800.stm.

Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks, September 11, 2001."*The American Presidency Project.* Ed. John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999–2011. Accessed July 11, 2011. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58057.

—. "Remarks at Parkrose High School in Portland, Oregon, January 5, 2002." *The American Presidency Project.* Ed. John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. Uni-

versity of California, Santa Barbara, 1999–2011. Accessed July 11, 2011. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=73221.

Christian, Ed. "Introducing the Post-Colonial Detective: Putting Marginality to Work." *The Post-Colonial Detective*. Ed. Ed Christian. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001. 1–16.

—. "Ethnic Postcolonial Crime and Detection (Anglophone)." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 283–95.

Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 11, 2001*. 2004. London: Penguin, 2005.

Furedi, Frank. *Politics of Fear*. London and New York: Continuum, 2005.

Halliday, Fred. *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. 1996. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003.

Home Office. *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005: Ordered by the House of Commons to Be Printed 11th May 2006*. HC 1087. London: The Stationery Office, 2006. PDF File. http://www.officialdocuments.gov.uk/document/hc0506/hc10/1087/1087.pdf.

Horsley, Lee. *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2005.

Houen, Alex. *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*. Oxford and New York: Oxford U P, 2002.

Jackson, Richard. *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-Terrorism*. Manchester and New York: Manchester U P, 2005.

Jackson, Richard, Marie Smyth, and Jeroen Grunning, eds. *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Jarvis, Lee. "Times of Terror: Writing Temporality into the War on Terror." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1.2 (2008): 245–62.

"Fundamentalism." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster 2011. 11 July 2011.

Mockaitis, Thomas R. *The "New" Terrorism: Myths and Reality*. Westport, CN, and London: Prager Security International, 2007.

Neate, Patrick. *City of Tiny Lights*. 2005. London: Penguin, 2006.

Reagan, Ronald. "Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985." *The American Presidency Project*. Ed. John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999–2011. 11 Jul. 2011. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38274.

Rosenberg, Yvonne. "'Stop Thinking Like an Englishman' or: Writing Against a Fixed Lexicon of Terrorism in Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights*." *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*. Eds.

Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Christoph Reinfandt. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008. 355–68.

Scanlan, Margaret. *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 2001.

Topalova, Violeta. "Interview with Patrick Neate." *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*. Ed. Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Christoph Reinfandt. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008. 405–13.

Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. 2006. New York: Vintage, 2007.

Zulaika, Joseba, and William Douglass. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.